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Mossad Chief Retires After Eight Years

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Top Israeli spymaster Yitzhak Hofi came out of the shadows Sunday, returning to civilian life after 8 years as chief of the Mossad intelligence agency and commander of Israel's secret war.

The publication ban that hid the identity of the head of the Institute for Intelligence and Special Tasks was lifted for the first time when Prime Minister Menachem Begin thanked him for his work.

His accomplishments were kept secret but Hofi is associated with the intelligence work that helped commandos free Israeli hostages at Entebbe in 1976 and bomb Iraq's nuclear reactor near Baghdad last year.

The name of his successor was kept secret. Hofi's retirement was postponed because his designated successor, Maj. Gen. Yekutiel Adam, was killed during the first days of the invasion of Lebanon.

Hofi, 55, is a former member of the pre-state Palmach guerrillas. He became a platoon commander in Israel's first war in 1948, serving later as an aide to Ariel Sharon -- now defense minister -- in an elite paratroop regiment.

He was credited with a major contribution to Israel's victories in the 1967 war, when he was chief of the operations branch in the general staff.

In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Hofi is credited with calling for reinforcements to the northern front with Syria a few days before the war broke out.

As commander of the northern front, he was responsible for the counterattack that repulsed the Syrians and saved the Israeli defenses from imminent collapse.

His foresight may have been a factor in then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's decision to name him as head of Israel's version of the CIA, generally referred to as the Mossad. The name means "institute" in Hebrew.

The appointment came at a time when the country's intelligence agency was in turmoil because of the blunders that led to the losses in Israel's toughest war since the state was founded in 1948.

Since then little is known of Hofi's activities, but the Mossad is believed to have scored a number of successes in the secret war that never stops despite erratic periods of quiet in the Middle East.

Mossad's scores reportedly included the elimination of Palestinians suspected of involvement in terrorist actions in Israel and the occupied territories.

The failings that led to the 1973 disaster are also said to have been solved.

The Israeli press has credited Hofi with acting as advance man at some stages of the delicate contacts that led to signing of a peace treaty with Egypt.

He has recently been named as a candidate to head Israel's electric company.